DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 452 011 RC 022 948

AUTHOR	Blair, Leslie Asher, Ed.
TITLE	Changes & Challenges for Rural Schools.
INSTITUTION	Southwest Educational Development Lab., Austin, TX.
SPONS AGENCY	Department of Education, Washington, DC.
ISSN	ISSN-0520-7315
PUB DATE	2001-04-00
NOTE	25p.; Theme issue.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.sedl.org/pubs/sedletter/v13n01/v13n01.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	SEDLetter; v13 n1 Apr 2001
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Change Strategies; *Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Professional Development; *Rural Education; Rural Schools; Rural Youth; School Community Relationship; Small Schools; Social Problems; Youth Problems

ABSTRACT

This theme issue of the newsletter SEDLetter contains articles about the challenges facing rural youth, communities, and schools, and the ways that rural schools are meeting those challenges. "When Rural Traditions Really Count" (Ullik Rouk) outlines the rural situation with regard to adolescent substance abuse, youth gangs, teen pregnancy, homelessness, poverty, and lack of services, and suggests school-community strategies for prevention and intervention. "Service Learning Sparks Community and Student Achievement in Balmorhea" (John V. Pennington) describes serving learning initiatives in a small Texas school and subsequent improvements in student achievement. "Change Is a Constant at Cochiti" (Pamela Porter) describes Montessori and multi-age approaches at a small New Mexico school and professional development efforts focused on curriculum development and accountability. "Oklahoma's Master Teachers Project Leads Teacher along a Professional Path" describes a study-group approach to professional development for science and math teachers. "Changing Practice To Meet Student Needs in Humphrey" (John V. Pennington) examines a small Arkansas school's effort to promote instructional coherence and develop consistency in student evaluation across grade levels. "Parkin Elementary School Networks for Success" (John V. Pennington) discusses a small Arkansas school's participation in the Reading Success Network. "Resources for Rural Schools" (Leslie Blair) describes general rural resources and resources related to service learning, mental health issues, after-school programs, and the links between school improvement and community development. Sidebars describe after-school programs, a cultural approach to substance use prevention, and Cochiti's improved math scores. (SV)

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Southwest Educational Development Laboratory News

SEDLETTER

VOLUME XIII NUMBER 1 APRIL 2001

Changes & Challenges for Rural Schools

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Rural Schools Changing to Meet Their Challenges

RURAL SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES can offer students opportunities that large schools can only dream about—low student-teacher ratios, individualized attention for students by staff who know students and their families well, high levels of student participation in extracurricular activities, and strong community support. However, rural schools face challenges that at times seem insurmountable. A declining economic base and increasing poverty in many communities have resulted in families not only struggling to make ends meet but also straining to keep their families intact. And studies indicate drug and alcohol abuse, gang activity, adolescent pregnancy, and homelessness are just as prevalent among rural students as urban students—and in some cases even more so.

For rural communities, the school is truly inseparable from the community. In a town that lacks a movie theater, mall, or other entertainment, the school becomes the social and even moral center of the lives of the children and teenagers in the community. In some communities, some students might never learn about the world beyond their community if it were not for their schools.

The stories of schools in this issue of *SEDLetter* tell of dedicated rural educators who try to capitalize on the advantages inherent in small schools and communities, while overcoming the challenges through innovation, collaboration, and determination. All of the schools you will read about are beset by low budgets, high numbers of low-income families, and isolation—whether it is isolation due to geography, tradition, or culture.

While putting this issue together, we talked to quite a few educators in small schools and districts. The schools trying to overcome the most difficulties usually had dedicated staff and community members committed to making their schools better. Despite the support and efforts, all were struggling with school improvement and student achievement. They were also trying to balance academic growth with improving the overall quality of life for their students. Several were trying to overcome generations of poor parenting and indifference toward education, with few social-service or outside agencies to help them. Amazingly, they carry on. As one administrator said, "We can't give up on the kids."

SEDL

SEDLETTER

The Award-Winning Magazine of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory
ISSN/520-7315

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CREDITS: Jane Thurmond, Austin, Texas, designed *SEDLetter*. The photos used on pages 3, 4, 7, and 9 are ©PhotoDisc. The photographs on pages 5, 6, and 8 are courtesy of Melanie Sawyer at Plainview-Rovar School, Plainview, Arkansas. All of the photos on pages 10–16 were taken by Las Cruces, New Mexico, freelance photographer Pamela Porter. The photographs on pages 18–21 were taken by John V. Pennington, Hot Springs, Arkansas.

SEDLetter complements and draws upon work performed by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory under a variety of funding sources, including the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Government. The publication is not supported with direct program funds related to any SEDL programs or projects. *SEDLetter* does not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Government or any other source. You are welcome to reproduce *SEDLetter* and distribute copies at no cost to recipients; please credit the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory as publisher and respect the copyrights of designated illustrators, designers, and contributors. SEDL is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer and is committed to affording equal employment opportunities for all individuals in all employment matters. Available in alternative formats.

When Rural Traditions Really Count

By Üllik Rouk

Drugs, youth gangs, adolescent pregnancy, homelessness. Urban blights? Yes, but students in America's rural schools are no more immune from these problems than their peers in big cities.

Ullik Rouk is with Policy Studies Associates in Washington, D.C.

During the past decade, there has been new research examining the vulnerability of rural youth to the spread of these problems. And the statistics present the stark reality confronting America's rural educators: drug and alcohol abuse, gang activity, adolescent pregnancy, and homelessness are just as prevalent among their students as among urban students, and in some cases even more so.

The good news coming out of these studies is that rural youth still think their schools and communities are safer and better places to be than do their urban peers. This suggests that there are opportunities for rural schools and communities to intervene with positive youth development alternatives before hard-core activity takes tight hold.

Evidence of Rural Problems

SUBSTANCE USE AND GANGS

Alcohol remains the most widely abused substance among rural teens. However, other substances are wending their way through America's back roads and into the hands of its youth. Data analyzed by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University show that, when compared with their urban peers, eighth graders in rural America are 104 percent more likely to succumb to the lure of amphetamines. This includes methamphetamine, a highly addictive substance that can spark erratic, violent, paranoid, and hyperactive behavior and cause brain damage. And the bad news doesn't stop there. According to CASA, rural eighth graders are 83 percent likelier than those in urban centers to use crack cocaine; 50 percent likelier to use cocaine; 34 percent likelier to smoke marijuana; 29 percent likelier to drink alcohol; and 70 percent likelier to get drunk (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University [CASA], 2000).

Among rural tenth and twelfth graders, use rates exceed those in large urban areas for every drug except Ecstasy and marijuana. Rates are higher for the use of cocaine, crack, amphetamines, inhalants, alcohol, cigarettes and smokeless tobacco.

The drugs are easy to obtain. One theory espoused by law enforcement officials is that the large gangs that often control drug distribution in the cities are seeking new markets in smaller communities, away from escalating competition among sellers and tougher law enforcement in urban areas. In some cases, rural areas with their many back roads, places to land small airplanes, and sparse populations have become safer places for drug traffickers to hide.

As elsewhere, the introduction of drugs into rural communities brings increases in crime and youth gangs. Youth gangs, once primarily an urban scourge, have tripled their number in rural areas, according to some estimates (Caldrella, Sharpnack, Loosli, & Merrell, 1996). These gangs are much like their urban counterparts, except

Educators note that it is often not student substance use that is the problem, but parental use. A middle school counselor in a small Central Texas school district reports, "We deal with students who are unhappy, miserable, or angry . . . eventually you find out there is parental drug involvement or abuse and neglect at home." She adds that although it isn't the norm, a few families have fled from the city to her rural district to get away from law enforcement or Child Protective Services.

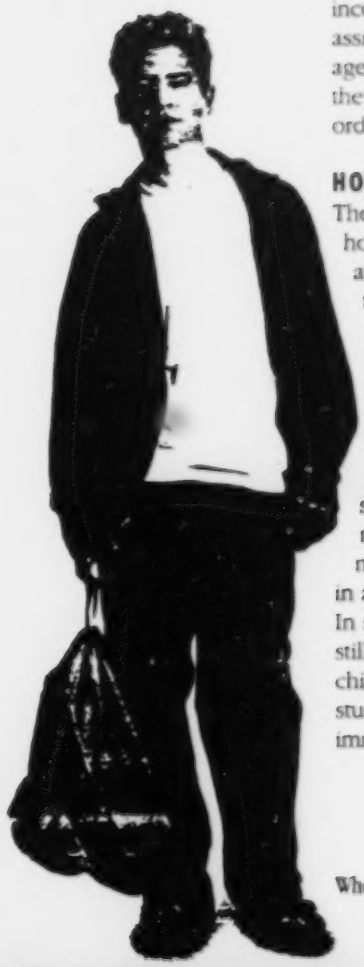
that while city gangs usually identify with a "turf" or "hood," rural gang members come from a much larger area and may travel some miles to be with fellow members.

According to a study of rural school counselors, more than one-third of the counselors surveyed indicated a growing gang presence in their communities (Caldrella et al., 1996). More than half said that crime was increasing in their community. Counselors also cited rising rates of school truancy, suspensions, and expulsions. A striking 88 percent agreed drugs were easily available near their school.

TEEN PREGNANCY

The first study to look specifically at rural adolescent pregnancy was conducted in 197" by the Rural Health Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Skatrud, Bennett, & Loda, 1998). It revealed a birthrate of 38 per 1,000 rural teenagers between the ages of 15 and 17 and an urban birthrate of 29 per 1000 among urban teens of the same age.

The issue of early childbearing provokes concern because few teenage girls have the income or parenting skills to rear a child without assistance from relatives, schools, or welfare agencies. With few daycare centers available, they are often forced to drop out of school in order to care for their children.



HOMELESSNESS

The lack of affordable housing, precipitating homelessness among rural residents, is still another urban condition that is shattering the myth of bucolic America. Figures on homelessness are difficult to obtain, especially in rural areas. Nonetheless, researchers estimate that families, single mothers, and children make up the largest group of the rural homeless (Vissing, 1996). One of the many difficulties of families in such straits is that unless they can stay with relatives or friends, these rural homeless are more likely to live in a car or camper than in a shelter, giving them no official address. In some states, the lack of a permanent address still poses an enormous barrier to enrolling children in school. Additionally, homeless students are often missing birth certificates and immunization records needed for enrollment.

When Rural Conditions Really Count *continues on page 6*

'Date Nite

In 1997, teacher Kerry Cunningham realized the teenagers at Plainview-Rover School needed something to do on the weekends besides going to "park." At the time, the K–12 school had one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in Arkansas.

Cunningham and parent Melanie Sawyer, a critical-care nurse for 23 years, developed an abstinence education program that features "Date Nite" every Friday or Saturday night—a way to engage the Plainview-Rover students in group activities that are sometimes enriching, but always fun. At the heart of the program is an abstinence curriculum for seventh and ninth graders. It also includes assemblies presenting a variety of speakers from health department representatives to unwed mothers and a variety of special events.

Since the program began, Cunningham has moved away from Plainview, but Sawyer is still active and dedicated to making life better for the students in this working-class community of 750. In fact, she has become the director of the 21st Century Community Learning Center in the school district—one of more than 3,600 nationwide funded through the U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program.

On Date Nites, students in grades 7–12 from Plainview-Rover, or any other school in the county, are invited to spend the evening doing something fun, such as going bowling in a town 30 miles away, or attending a dance, or participating in a fun night in the school gym. A fun night may involve playing basketball, board games, or table tennis and watching videos. Students are always given dinner. Occasionally the group will do something special such as go to the IMAX Theatre in Little Rock, 69 miles away. The school pays for the activities, but Date Nite participants are required to bring five dollars to pay for their meals. There is a special fund for students who can't afford to pay.

Date Nite provides a constant source of adult friendship in the lives of students who are often left alone or who don't feel they can talk to their parents openly about sex and other sensitive topics. There is a core group of 12 adults—teachers and parents—who chaperone, drive the students to

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Takes on a Whole New Meaning at Plainview-Rover School

By Leslie Blair

activities when Date Nite is held off campus, and if needed, take the kids home after the program is over. Sawyer says, "We are really open with the kids—we try to be there for them. We are like the parents many of them don't have around." She reports that students frequently express their appreciation to the adults involved in the program.

Sawyer has seen an improvement in behavior, including a reduction in substance abuse and petty crime, since Date Nite has begun. She notes that students who used to be "troublemakers" now never miss Date Nite and the chance to socialize with the other 30–50 students who attend.

School staff members try to stay on message about abstinence but Sawyer says, "you can't do it every single day, day in and day out, or the students won't pay attention to you." However, through activities that are both entertaining and meaningful, combined with the abstinence curriculum, the team at Plainview-Rover School are getting the message across. Some of the more innovative activities include the "Rocking Teen Pregnancy Away" rockathon where students rocked in rocking chairs from eight in the morning until six in the evening to raise money and awareness, and "Messages from the Heart," a scavenger hunt for 25 abstinence and drug-free messages.

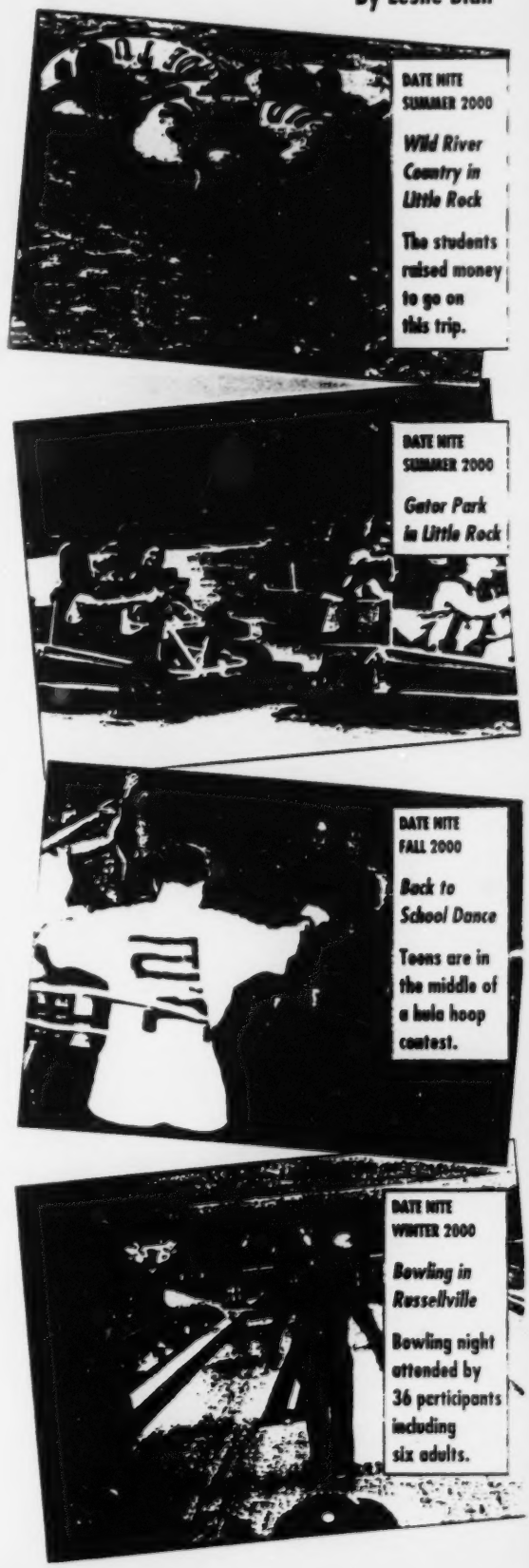
The abstinence curriculum includes a frank discussion of the facts of life with students. One of the coaches instructs the boys, and Sawyer the girls. It also includes the "Baby Think It Over" program with computerized dolls that simulate a real baby. The students must take care of the babies programmed to need changing, feeding, and burping. Sawyer reports the students are always excited to get their babies, but when they return them, their comments are "You can have this baby back!" or "I'm not ready for this!"

Sawyer is enthusiastic about the school's abstinence program which has helped reduce the pregnancy rate from five or six a year (among approximately150 high school students) to one this past year. This is the first time in many years there have been no pregnancies in the graduating class. The one pregnancy involved a student who had not attended the ninth-grade abstinence class and had not participated in Date Nite activities. "I think that would have a made a difference," says Sawyer.

After-School Program Meets Other Student Needs

Just as the Date Nite program provides a safety net for students who might engage in risky behaviors on the weekends, Plainview-Rover's after-school program supports the many latchkey children in the district who can easily become involved in high-risk behaviors each afternoon. The 21st Century Community Learning Center program features an educational activity each day, tutoring, access to computers and the school library, and a variety of enrichment activities. Students who aren't doing well academically are especially encouraged to attend the program so they can receive additional help.

To foster participation in the program, the district is trying to eliminate barriers to attendance. Because transportation is definitely an issue in this community, where most parents commute to jobs in the lumber and poultry industries in neighboring cities and towns, the district is now working with businesses in the region to establish



DATE NITE SUMMER 2000

Wild River Country in Little Rock

The students raised money to go on this trip.

DATE NITE SUMMER 2000

Gator Park in Little Rock

DATE NITE FALL 2000

Back to School Dance

Teens are in the middle of a hula hoop contest.

DATE NITE WINTER 2000

Bowling in Russellville

Bowling night attended by 36 participants including six adults.

'Date Nite'

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The *Baby Think It Over* program was started in October of 1999 as part of the 7th and 9th grade abstinence classes. These were two of the 64 students who participated this year.

safe drop-off areas. If the drop-off areas become a reality, parents could pick their children up in the evenings from these scattered locations instead of driving to the school "That way parents may only have to drive a mile or so to pick up their children after school," explains Sawyer.

Sawyer has worked hard to get such enrichment activities as Tae Kwan Do and the 4-H Club in place for after-school participants. Currently she is looking for someone to give dance lessons to the students, and she is continually trying to drum up financial support from area businesses. The students often raise money for special activities by holding such fundraisers as car washes.

A recent overnight field trip was to Perryville, Arkansas, to visit Heifer Project International. The organization provides livestock to families in underdeveloped countries and offers educational opportunities, too. The field trip simulated a global village where students were assigned to a pretend village, set up just as a village would be in an underdeveloped country. In the Plainview-Rover group, there were 20 students and chaperones. The group was given only two and a half gallons of water and had to make decisions about the way they would live for a day, given limited resources. Sawyer reports the students had to use problem-solving, math, and social skills to get the food and firewood they needed for the day through bartering and resource allocation. Her after-school program students were so enthusiastic, they want to return for a one-week camp this summer.

In a district that is struggling to get parents involved in their children's education, the after-school program is also a way to get parents into the school. Parents are required to attend three out of five parent meetings for the after-school program in order for their children to remain in the program.

For the Plainview-Rover School staff, creating a safe, educational, and supportive environment is key, says Sawyer, "because many of our students don't have that at home."

Field trips, such as a recent visit to Heifer Project International, are part of Plainview-Rover's after-school program.

Communications associate Leslie Blair is editor of SEDLetter. You may reach Leslie at lblair@sedl.org.

When Rural Traditions Really Count

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Poverty and Other Reasons for Increasing Social Problems

Certainly, poverty fuels some of these rural difficulties. America's rural residents are still the poorest in the nation. In 1997, the poverty rate in nonmetropolitan areas was 15.9 percent, as opposed to 12.6 percent in metropolitan areas, a rate that has held relatively constant since 1991 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Moreover, many rural people live just above the poverty line. The working poor make up 26.3 percent of rural residents as opposed to 18.2 percent of city residents.

Unsurprisingly, economic marginality slides easily into worry and confusion. Such family stress can have a devastating impact on young people's motivation and school achievement, precursors to dropping out of school, drug use, crime, and early childbearing. What's more, the effort rural families must make to earn a living leaves little time for parents to take part in community, school, and social activities.

Observers of rural America also attribute many of the growing social problems to the cultural transition that is altering the rural landscape. Communications technologies including satellite television and the Internet have contributed greatly to relieving some of the isolation that rural youth face. On the flip side, these technologies have initiated rural youth to urban culture, including gang culture and dress.

Researcher Daryl Hobbs of the University of Missouri observes that in the days when small towns were the social and economic centers for surrounding farms, strong local traditions weighed heavily on social norms and behaviors. Today, however, many rural residents travel to metropolitan areas for daily necessities such as employment, shopping, and health care. All this draws time, loyalty, and identity away from small towns. With the loss of their economic and service functions, small towns have lost substantial influence on how their residents interact and behave. The consequences of such changes in rural life are a weakening of community ties, a sense of powerlessness among residents, including youth, and a diminished capacity of rural communities to come together on their own behalf (Hobbs, 1995).

Difficulties in Providing Services

A number of unique circumstances coalesce to complicate the provision of high-quality treatment and prevention services to rural youth. Rural areas typically do not have the networks of social agencies and private and nonprofit organizations that stand ready to intervene with troubled teens. In addition, their small, widely scattered populations often lack public transportation to get them to treatment centers and other places where they can pursue more healthy activities. Rural people also tend to be steeped in a tradition of self-reliance. Asking for outside assistance or receiving treatment may be seen as a sign of weakness (CASA, 2000). Likewise rural residents may doubt that interventions will be effective or that their personal affairs will be kept confidential.

Attracting education and health professionals who specialize in prevention and treatment programs for young people remains a key issue in providing accessible social services in rural areas. A recent survey shows that only 6.6 percent of substance-abuse treatment providers who serve rural youth specialized in the areas of drug or alcohol abuse, as opposed to 17.8 percent of providers based in urban areas. Most professional schools for mental health and substance abuse counselors focus on an urban model of service delivery, and workers are trained in a specialty field. This training is often inadequate to prepare professionals for the generalist role that they must play in smaller communities (CASA, 2000).

Search for Solutions

Schools remain the one institution in rural communities around which most residents are likely to rally on behalf of their youth. It falls to schools then to not only alert the community when problems with youth exist but also to pull the community together and create a plan of collective action. The fact that rural students still report that their schools and communities are safer and less-threatening places than those of their urban peers offers some encouragement that interventions put in place soon can curb some of these widening problems (Evans, Fitzgerald, Weigel, & Chvilicek, 1999).

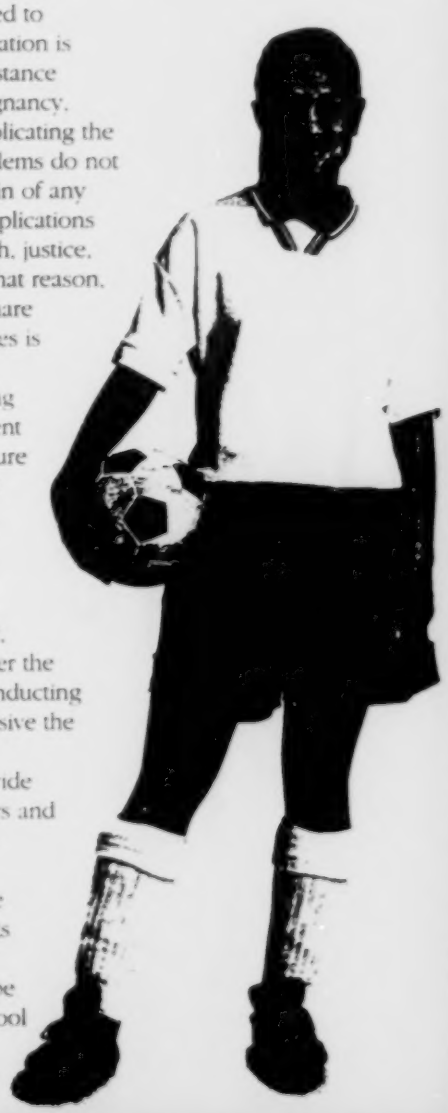
Sadly, most programs cited nationally as models of drug, alcohol, and pregnancy prevention, or that present alternatives to gang activity, have been developed for urban centers and are inappropriate for rural communities. Also, advocates of rural education are quick to point out that no one place is typically rural. Socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural variations among rural communities differ, so local problem-solving efforts will differ as well. For schools, this means that any services to thwart drug abuse, violence, adolescent pregnancy, and other problems must begin with a community's own uniqueness and strengths. Fortunately, many rural communities have preserved the traditions that really count: large networks of family, friends, and neighbors, traditions of volunteering and mutual aid, and cultural attitudes and values.

Often, the first hurdle is addressing widespread denial of the problem. Here, educators are essential in promoting reality-based public education and getting the backing of local business and political leaders, who may have reasons of their own to prefer that the problems remain invisible.

But schools should not be expected to shoulder these issues alone. Collaboration is essential to combating increased substance abuse, crime and violence, early pregnancy, homelessness, and other issues complicating the lives of rural youth because the problems do not break down into the exclusive domain of any institution or agency. Rather, their implications fall into educational, economic, health, justice, family, legal, and social realms. For that reason, getting other agencies on board to share information and integrate their services is a key part of the solution.

Schools can take the lead in pulling together a community-wide assessment that gives a clearer picture of the nature and extent of local problems and the resources available to address them. Such resources include not only financial resources but also mentors for youth, health centers and other social service agencies, political clout, parents, and peer groups. The broader the base of the community task force conducting the assessment, the more comprehensive the outcome is likely to be.

Another role for schools is to provide professional development for teachers and administrators in such topics as peer aggression and self-esteem, gangs and youth violence, preparing for the unexpected, balancing students' rights and responsibilities, and making campuses safe. Similarly, there may be a need for additional training for school counselors. Close to half of the



After-school programs are one way schools and rural communities can work together to provide a safe place for children of working parents to stay after school as well as offer enrichment activities and tutoring. After-school programs can integrate activities for which there may not be time during the regular school day such as character education or fine arts programs. They also offer an ideal time to incorporate peer-to-peer tutoring and to build on classroom learning.

Some districts, such as Plainview-Rover in Arkansas, incorporate summer camps into their after-school program (see photos at right).

Mother's Day Project

Personal Skills Camp

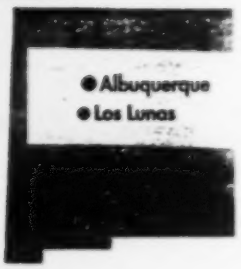
Summer Art Camp

respondents in the survey of rural school counselors said they were not well enough trained to handle the gang-related issues with which they were forced to deal (Caldrella et al., 1996). Training for students and parents in spotting the symptoms and counteracting destructive behavior before it occurs is an equally important piece of the puzzle.

Many of the supports that rural adolescents need to curb unhealthy behaviors are the same as those for urban teens. Some of these are

- education and strong basic skills training,
- a range of non-academic opportunities for success,
- links to caring adults who provide positive role models, values, and support,
- family life education and life planning,
- comprehensive adolescent health services, and
- a basic standard of living for all teen and their families, including access to jobs, nutrition, housing, income, and services to meet special needs.

East Mesa Team Takes a Cultural Approach to Substance Use Prevention



On the East Mesa, about 10 miles from Los Lunas, New Mexico, is an area that seems more remote than it really is. Low-income families, many of them immigrants from Mexico, live in mobile homes in two *colonias* on the mesa. There are no paved roads, police protection, medical services, or garbage pickup.

What isn't lacking on the East Mesa, however, is a sense of community and a community that cares about its children and teenagers.

Maria Elena Ayala, a local community action leader, says that alcohol and drug use among youth is the biggest problem on the East Mesa. She notes their community is taking a cultural approach to addressing these problems through its Collaborative Action Team (CAT) that was begun with the help of SEDL.

Six to eight times a year, the CAT plans community celebrations around holidays or special events that emphasize an anti-alcohol and anti-drug message. For example, during the past six months the team organized Día de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead), Thanksgiving, Virgin de Guadalupe, and Valentine's celebrations. At each of these events, parents planned the activities and entertainment and brought the food. A recent celebration was attended by a thousand children and teens.

"At the celebrations, we always affirm our culture and emphasize the importance of being drug and alcohol free," says Ayala. She says that a constant message to the kids is for them not to fall into the trap of advertisers. "We talk openly about the tobacco and alcohol industries and about valuing our family and neighborhoods."

Service providers come to the parties, too, so that residents can get to know them and learn about the services available. According to Ayala, a public health nurse usually attends as well as someone from the Safe & Drug Free Schools program and from the area domestic violence agency.

Día de Los Muertos this year was a special celebration dedicated to the teenagers in Valencia County who had lost their lives to violence, alcohol, and drugs. "We honored those teens and celebrated; we remembered and learned," says Ayala.

Programs that target the entire family may bolster the teen's optimism and self-esteem, which in turn could reduce high-risk behaviors. So might programs developed around peer leadership.

Work conducted by the Search Institute (Blythe, 1993) shows that youth who participate in some form of structured community activity are less likely to behave in ways that put them at risk of poor mental and physical health. The problem for many young people living in rural areas, however, is finding community activities that are accessible and meaningful to them.

Many rural schools across the country have initiated efforts to link youth with efforts to revitalize their communities. In these communities, students help with studies, analyses, projects, and other real-world work in conjunction with schools, local businesses, and community agencies. High school students are an obvious resource to determine the extent of local substance abuse and violence, and they can help develop and implement plans and projects to ameliorate these problems, if they are found to exist. Students can undertake community work as a part of both their formal education and their education as community citizens. They can learn economics by studying how the local economy connects with the world outside their town. Research shows that these approaches are educationally effective and that they contribute to community well-being (Boethel, 2000). An added benefit is that such work can help students to become stakeholders in the community. Students' self-esteem can be expected to increase in direct proportion to their accomplishments (Hobbs, 1995).

Also, increasing the consciousness of policymakers about the growing plight of rural youth is vital if community members are to draw attention to the issues. Increased coordination efforts need to include the local community and state and federal governments.

Behind each statistic given in this story, there is a rural child or youth crying out for help. But with the help of supportive communities and forward-thinking school administrators and policymakers, there is hope that rural schools can draw on their many strengths to create the best of all worlds for their students. SEDL

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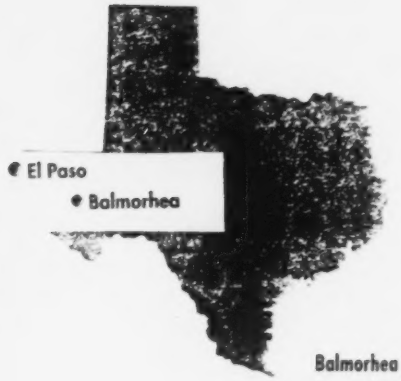
Service Learning Sparks Community and Student Achievement in Balmorhea



Balmorhea principal Michael Barrandey and students enjoy the West Texas sunshine.

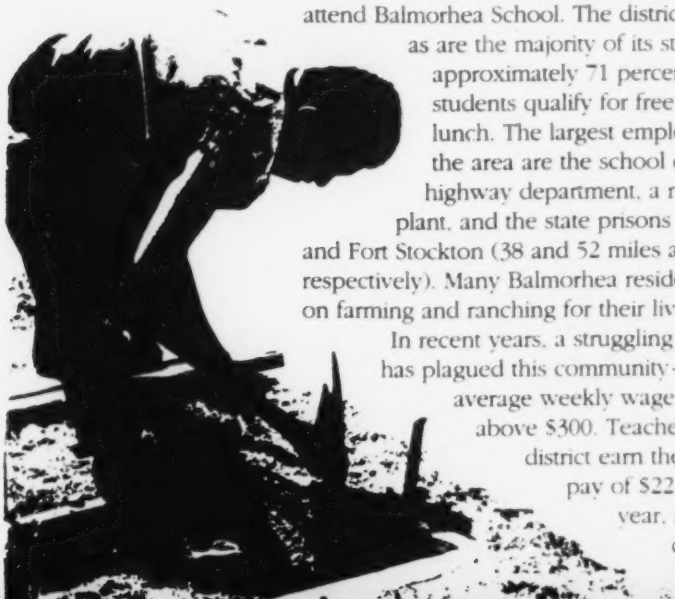
By John V. Pennington

It may seem surprising to find an innovative school in the Chihuahuan desert of far West Texas, especially in a town of only 855. But the residents of Balmorhea have found innovative ways to improve their community and their children's education. Struggling communities don't need miracles to succeed, according to Balmorhea principal Michael Barrandey. "You just have to think out of the box," he says.

The Balmorhea Independent School District serves 230 students in grades K–12, who all attend Balmorhea School. The district is poor, as are the majority of its students—approximately 71 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. The largest employers in the area are the school district, the highway department, a rock crushing plant, and the state prisons in Pecos and Fort Stockton (38 and 52 miles away, respectively). Many Balmorhea residents depend on farming and ranching for their livelihoods.

In recent years, a struggling economy has plagued this community—the average weekly wage hovers just above $300. Teachers in the district earn the state base pay of $22,700 per year, making it difficult for Balmorhea ISD to compete with larger districts in the area, such as Odessa which pays its starting teachers approximately $32,000 per year. Odessa, the nearest town of any size (population 95,700), is 110 miles northeast of Balmorhea on Interstate 20.

"We're a poor district," says Barrandey. "We don't have tons of money like some schools . . . we have to do the best we can with what we've got."



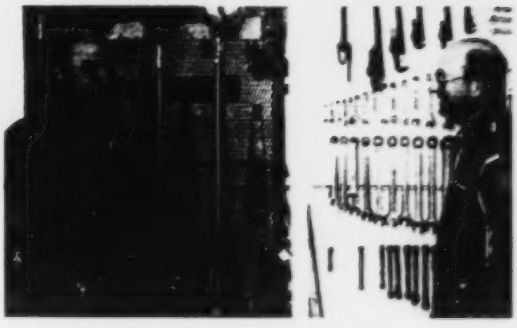
Under the supervision of ag science teacher Bob Bagley, this Balmorhea student helps prepare to build a ramp.

It's the People Who Make a Difference

Although the district is financially poor, Barrandey, who has worked in the district since 1978, cites a wealth of people in the community who care about the school district and the town. Despite the low teacher salaries, the district has a teacher turnover rate that "is almost nothing," he reports. Of the school's 25 teachers, 10 of them are "homegrown."

Due to the small number of students in the district, administrators and teachers know their students well and are able to provide personalized attention.

"We pretty well know exactly what each kid is doing, what they're not doing, if they're going to tutorial, if they're not. We know if they're supposed to leave campus or not, those kinds



For left: Students work on the construction of a ramp on campus.

Top right: Downtown Balmorhea. Water from San Solomon Springs brought settlers to the area in the early 1900s.

Bottom right: Principal Michael Barrandey chats with ag science teacher Bob Bagley in the school's shop area.

of things," Barrandey says. "We know about their home lives. If they have any problems they'll come talk to us . . . you do a little bit of counseling, a little bit of teaching, a little bit of everything."

The teachers at Balmorhea make all the difference, notes Amy Averett, a program specialist with SEDL's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools. Averett worked with the Balmorhea schools during the past two years through SEDL's Rural Development Collaborative Action Team project.

"There's a core group of teachers at Balmorhea who are interested in integrating the curriculum with real-life experiences that connect the students to their community," she says.

The sense of community now so prevalent has not always existed in Balmorhea, however.

"In 1993, Balmorhea was a community where people wanted to make positive changes in the school and community, but they were each working in isolation," Barrandey observes. "Their intentions were good and they really did some things for the community, but eventually people just got tired. The same ones were doing things over and over. . . . they were just worn out."

That lack of community involvement may have been reflected, in part, in the low standardized test scores among its students. In 1994, only 25 percent of Balmorhea students passed the state-mandated Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) examination.

"We were on the rock bottom," Barrandey admits.

Service Learning Comes to the Rescue

That same year, Barrandey attended a three-day workshop on service learning, which is a way for students to learn through community service activities that are aimed at meeting critical community needs.

The workshop Barrandey attended led to a $5,000 service-learning grant that was used to start several service learning projects: the district's concrete tennis courts were repaired, an EMS training project undertaken, and trees were planted in a run-down community park and throughout the town.

It was the spark that ignited a wildfire of community service in Balmorhea.

"Things kind of started taking off from there," Barrandey explains. "All of a sudden the city took it on itself to do some beautification downtown. Then the state came in and built walkways and curbs down the middle of town . . . As a result of that, other little projects have come up and people are getting involved."

SEDL program manager Cathy Jordan, who oversees SEDL's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, views service learning as a win-win situation. "Local residents get help that isn't otherwise accessible in remote, resource-strapped rural areas, while students get hands-on learning experiences, opportunities to relate to their local environment, and a much-needed sense of utility and worth."

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Business teacher Yolanda Hernandez (above left) was instrumental in getting the community health clinic up and running.

Wiring is the task of the day in the school's technology class (above right).

Quality of Life Improves for Balmorhea

Balmorhea's first service learning initiative led to the founding of numerous community service projects, including a school-based community health clinic, operated in cooperation with the Texas Tech Health Science Center. This is the town's only medical facility. A doctor from Odessa sees between 15–20 patients each time he comes to the clinic. In addition to the doctor, the school nurse and students staff the clinic. Students check blood pressure and vital signs and do administrative work.

Business education teacher Yolanda Hernandez and school nurse Carol Hoffmeyer spearheaded the effort to establish the clinic. Like any good service learning project, students were involved in a variety of activities linked to their classroom curriculum. Hernandez's business students not only learned about medical procedures from Hoffmeyer, they procured grant applications, drafted business and medical plans, established objectives, discussed topics like business ethics and confidentiality, and became CPR certified. They also focused on learning about human relations by role-playing a variety of situations that could arise when the clinic was opened. Accounting students help set up the financial operations for the clinic and three male interior design students sewed colorful clinic gowns in a variety of sizes.

"It was a good opportunity for us," says Barrandey. "We didn't have any medical facility before we opened the clinic. The closest doctor was 38 miles away in Pecos. The problem is keeping a doctor interested in coming to a small community."

LPN Hilda Rodriguez stands in one of the clinic's examination rooms.

The district took another step to ensure the health of its students in September 2000 by providing free breakfast and lunch for every student. Funded by the federal government, Barrandey says he thinks the program has helped students perform better in the classroom.

"The experts say that kids that are fed in the morning think better, think more clearly, and are more attentive," he says. "I remember seeing a lot of kids with their heads down in class because they were sleepy. I don't see that anymore."

The school has also implemented an Adult Health Program, which allows adults in the community to use school facilities two nights a week. They can play basketball, lift weights, run, jog, or use the whirlpool. This provides a needed service to the town, since there is no exercise facility in Balmorhea.

"We want people to understand that this is their school," Barrandey says.

Students Prepare for a Competitive Workforce

To give its students an edge in the information economy, Balmorhea built a technology program that the principal considers "a leader" in West Texas. Funded by two Texas technology grants, the program allows the district to have a 1.3-to-1 computer-student ratio. Each student has access to the Internet and an email account, with safeguards in place to protect students from improper material.

The district has entered into a partnership with Cisco Systems to provide a two-year program to certify high school students as Cisco technicians. Students learn how to assemble computers, install memory, wire buildings for networks, and set up hubs. Two students who graduated from the program last year now earn $34,000 a year as computer technicians in Honduras. In a few years, they can expect an annual salary of $70,000, Barrandey says.

The school also benefits from students being trained in computer technology. Students do a lot of the technology work within the district, although the district is fortunate enough to have one full-time technology expert on staff.

Like many small school districts, Balmorhea is limited by the number of courses the high school can offer. The high school has arranged a distance-learning agreement with Sul Ross State University, Midland College, and Odessa College. Students can earn college credit while they are earning credits toward their high school diploma. Balmorhea is also working with Odessa High School to provide its students with higher-level coursework it cannot offer, such as trigonometry.

In a small town, many students never think about going to college. Many have never left Balmorhea. That is slowly changing, thanks in part to Upward Bound, a program to introduce high school students to a college campus and encourage them to attend collee. The school is now in its second year of Upward Bound.

"The thinking has shifted," Barrandey observes. "The students are looking at ways they can do some things. The program has changed their perspective as far as what life has to offer."

Student Achievement Rises

Barrandey says that seeing his students succeed in "the real world" lets him know that the district is doing its job, despite what test scores might say. "The definition of an effective school is a school that has high test scores," he explains. "A successful school is a school where students are successful all the way around."

Balmorhea is ranked by the Texas Education Agency as an "academically acceptable" district. TEA rankings are based largely on TAAS scores, but other factors such as attendance and drop-out rates are taken into account. Schools and school districts may be ranked as low-performing, acceptable, recognized, or exemplary.

"We're working hard to get to recognized and exemplary status," notes the Balmorhea principal. "We've made some gains. You have to take into account the fact that we are a small school in a rural community with low socioeconomics and at-risk factors. We will continue to work towards higher scores, but the success of our kids is evident in the real-world applications."

Since implementing service learning, Balmorhea's test scores have been on the rise. By the end of 1994, 50 percent of Balmorhea students had passed the TAAS. In 1995, that number increased to slightly more than 70 percent. In 2001, 78 percent of the district's students passed the test. Barrandey expects that number to steadily rise.

"The idea of service learning has impacted test scores indirectly," he says. "It has instilled pride in the kids, which has filtered out into the community."

Averett says of the eight rural school sites she has worked with, Balmorhea is one of her favorites. "Balmorhea is far and away the most innovative rural community that I have come across," she says. "The school has looked very closely to see what kind of needs the community has and has tried to meet those needs." SEDL

John V. Pennington is a freelance writer who lives in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

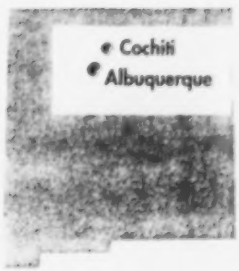
Balmorhea teachers and administrators provide students with a variety of real-world activities linked to the curriculum. The district has a partnership with Cisco Systems to provide a two-year program where students can be certified as Cisco technicians.

Change Is a Constant at Cochiti

By Pamela Porter

As 8-year-old Evie, an American Indian student at Cochiti Elementary and Middle School, works on a spelling lesson of her own choosing, her dark eyes widen and a smile springs to her lips when her mother and older sister enter the room. Today her classmates celebrate the day of Evie's birth, Montessori-style.

The girl runs small circles around a sun with the globe in her hand while her mother tells the K–2 students events from each year of Evie's life until the she has made eight rotations. The class cheers her final journey and bursts into three rounds of "Happy Birthday"—in English, Spanish, and Japanese. A boy wants to sing the song in his native Keres, as well, but doesn't know all the words. He is, however, learning the language of his people, the Cochiti Indians, who have lived and worked in the fertile Rio Grande Valley southwest of Santa Fe, New Mexico, for many generations.



After tribal leaders expressed their fear that the oral language of Keres was in danger of being lost, Bernalillo Public Schools (BPS) Superintendent Gary Dwyer initiated a program four years ago that connects American Indians with their heritage: Indian pueblos served by BPS now select members to teach Keres and Cochiti customs and history to tribal children as a regular part of the curriculum. All other students at Cochiti Elementary and Middle School learn Spanish.

With an ethnic mix of 52 percent American Indian and 47 percent Hispanic among its 230 students, Cochiti is one of several rural schools in the Bernalillo district that encompasses 648 square miles on the fringes of Albuquerque and Santa Fe.

"We're trying to make it easy for people to talk to us," Dwyer says, explaining that as part of an outreach program, he annually schedules at least two community meetings in each of the moderate-to-small-size villages within the district. He also welcomes recommendations from parent-teacher organizations and governance councils. The councils are made up of teachers, parents, and students and study the needs of their schools. Although Dwyer has noticed a gradual increase in community input during the four and a half years he has served as superintendent, "You still don't get a lot of participation," he acknowledges.

The isolation of these small rural BPS schools is a factor with advantages and drawbacks, which the superintendent has addressed in a number of creative ways. On the plus side, "Everyone knows everyone else, so it feels like a real community. People tend to take care of each other," he says.

Like many other superintendents of rural school districts, Dwyer notes, "The lack of proximity to urban areas means trouble finding and retaining teachers." And since the district shares certain teachers and resources, the distance between schools means long travel times that eat into the day. As he tries to address what he feels is a lack of fine arts development in the district, he has struggled to fill music and art teaching positions. "The arts are very important; in my mind they cement the learning process," says the superintendent, who has also initiated aggressive districtwide reading and math programs.

There is also the issue of the small size itself, particularly at the middle school level, Dwyer points out. With so few students, it's difficult to provide much selection in the way of electives for sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Special freshmen orientations, he says, help with the transition to Bernalillo High School, but with the high school boasting a thousand students, the experience can still be overwhelming for these teens.

Cochiti has been addressing these concerns while striving to improve student achievement in ongoing reform efforts for several years, and like all New Mexico schools, has been affected by the state-mandated accountability and assessment programs recently implemented.

Under the new system, all students are tested annually to determine their grasp of certain skills,

Pamela Porter is a freelance writer and photographer based in Las Cruces, New Mexico, who frequently contributes to SEDLetter.

and schools are ranked according to student performance. It is hoped these measures will identify schools and students in need of help, according to the scores from the state's standardized TerraNova tests. Of course, curriculum also needs to be aligned with revised state standards, and students must become accustomed to taking tests in order for them to perform well on the assessments.

Cochiti principal June Reed was new to the district and school in the 2000–2001 school year, but not to the job. She says when the opportunity to head the elementary and middle school became available, she jumped at the chance and out of retirement from New Mexico's Four Corners area.

When she arrived at the school, she was at first struck by the beauty of its location, where cedar and piñon trees are sprinkled among dusty hills that drop to the cottonwood forests and farms along the Rio Grande, then climb to distant blue mountain ranges in every direction. Reed was also impressed by the dedication of the staff members, many of whom were already preparing for the following school year when she came on board in July.

"Teachers have a real commitment to these students," the principal says with genuine appreciation. "This is a very student-centered environment." Perhaps that is one reason these educators have been willing to try a number of approaches to help Cochiti's high-minority and high- poverty population succeed.

Each of the K–2 teachers use the Montessori method, which enables students to choose their own activities and learn at individual paces. Pupils are engaged with each other and their work in Ann Villela's classroom, where they listen intently to a "book" written by one boy, visit with one of the class guinea pigs, then rush to select a project from rows of cubbyholes and set about their "hard work," all in a time frame that fits their attention spans.

The Montessori philosophy is somewhat carried over into the higher grades, Reed points out, as the school operates with multi-age classrooms and focuses on thematic units and hands-on learning. Also, older children mentor their younger schoolmates in the "Reading Buddies" program and become role models for them. An involved counselor, who is from the area, and small student-teacher ratios (16 teachers and 11 aides) add to the feeling of community at the school.

Math students in Richard Bonnem's 5th-6th grade class sit in clusters and work on problems individually, in small groups, or on the computer. Bonnem likes the multi-age approach, saying, "You see a lot of cooperation among the students. Plus, when I have students for two years, I am able to get to know them and what works best for them." He says he is contacted by parents about twice a week, and they are concerned about their children's education.

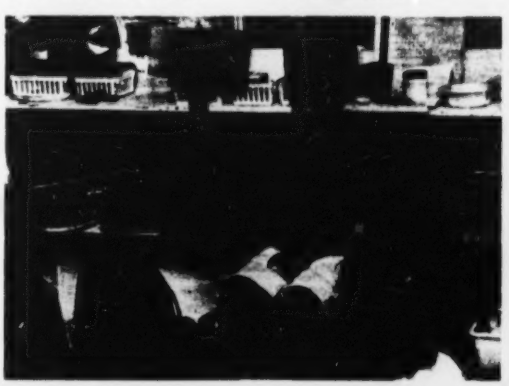
But even with the caring staff, supportive parents, and innovative programs in place, students were not doing well on standardized tests, so in 1998, teachers agreed to work with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) to improve student learning and achievement. "The focus of the project was to form a partnership with the school for comprehensive change," explains SEDL program specialist Tara Leo. A staff member with SEDL's Strategies for Increasing School Success program at the time, Leo says,. "This was not a model, but a true partnership. Those of us from SEDL worked as facilitators only—the real drive came from the teachers."

During the first year, Leo says, the Cochiti staff spent time reflecting on a variety of issues and concerns. Many teachers were concerned that students were not retaining information taught in class. They also disclosed they were uncomfortable with the curriculum. It was agreed the staff would first focus their efforts in the area of math, which, participating teachers and consultants believed, lacked coherence between grade levels.

The following year, SEDL staff and Cochiti teachers studied the curriculum and developed an ambitious schoolwide plan that included building coherence, increasing teacher knowledge in math, and implementing pre- and post-assessments that reveal what students need to learn and how well they did learn the material. Staff members from another SEDL program, the Eisenhower Southwest Consortium for the Improvement of Math and Science Teaching (SCIMAST), worked with the Cochiti faculty to align the school's curriculum with the state's TerraNova tests and helped teachers incorporate new district-mandated math materials.

A first-grade student shares a book he has written with principal June Reed.

The book this first-grader is showing his class is one he wrote himself.



Cochiti's Montessori K–2 classes offer students a variety of hands-on learning experiences.

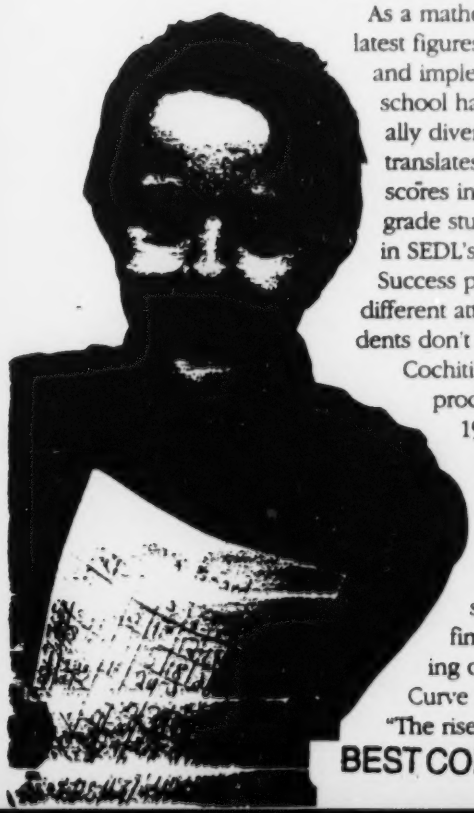
June Reed speaks for many of her staff members when she says, "Tests do not measure what our kids know; they measure how well students take tests." She explains Cochiti relies on multiple evaluations, such as required portfolio presentations that measure student performance, which enable the staff to view the whole child. But with the emphasis on assessment and accountability, she plans to advocate teaching test-taking techniques to help reduce student apprehension.

Change—never easy or painless—seems to have become the norm at Cochiti Elementary and Middle School, and the new principal is gratified the teachers and instructional assistants continue to work together for reform, especially since they have many demands on their time.

Her vision for the school? "I see this school as having the potential for every child to achieve at his or her highest ability and to have the staff satisfied with their work. That is so important. In fact, my goal is for Cochiti to be recognized as a National Blue Ribbon School in five years," she says, with absolutely no doubt that she and her dedicated colleagues can make it happen. SEDL

Cochiti's Focus on Math Is Rewarded With Improved Scores

"I was skeptical at first," admits Richard Bonnem, the 5th–6th grade math teacher at Cochiti Elementary and Middle School, as he reflects on the two-year process aimed at boosting student mathematics skills. "But now I'm seeing a focus where there was none. And there has also been an improvement in performance."



As a mathematician, Bonnem appreciates that latest figures indicate the methods developed and implemented from 1998–2000 at the rural school have made a difference for its culturally diverse students. This improvement translates to the consistently higher test scores in math for the 3rd–4th and 5th–6th grade students whose teachers participated in SEDL's Strategies for Increasing Student Success program. And he has observed a different attitude toward math as well: his students don't seem to be intimidated by it.

Cochiti principal June Reed enthusiastically produces a chart with data from the 1998–2000 New Mexico Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS/TerraNova Survey Plus) that shows substantial increases for most students in math, math computation, and math composite scores. She is visibly excited as her finger runs down the columns, pointing out hikes of more than 10 Normal Curve Equivalents for 4th–6th graders. "The rise in math computation for fifth grade was 15.9 and 14.3 for sixth graders," she proudly exclaims. "I'd say SEDL has been a good partner."

"The goal was to have the staff teach for understanding in math," explains Tara Leo, the SEDL program specialist who served as the SISS liaison for Cochiti. The implementation of pre- and post-assessments has been one strategy teachers have found particularly helpful, she says. Teachers are able to tailor their instruction to meet individual needs and then determine student retention. In order to obtain student perspective, teachers also interview three from the class—a high, an average, and a low performer. That insight has been invaluable, they report.

For two years Cochiti teachers worked with SEDL's Eisenhower Science and Math Consortium on yet another challenge—to switch gears and follow the Bernalillo Public Schools directive to teach the same math program throughout the district.

"Teachers have been appreciative. They say they appreciate the support and opportunity to learn to work together and grow professionally," says Como Molina of the Science and Math Consortium. He sees a need for more vertical alignment in the process—to locate gaps in teaching or redundancy. "It's just a matter of getting teachers on the same page, but that's the case for almost any school. It's a very good staff."

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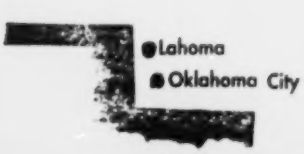
Oklahoma's Master Teachers Project Leads Teacher Along a Professional Path

For more information about National Board Certification, visit the Web site of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards at http://www.nbpts.org. A section called "State and Local Action" provides information about the kind of support each state offers to teachers who wish to obtain certification. For example, Oklahoma helps pay the application fee for a certain number of applicants and provides certified teachers with an additional $5,000 a year for 10 years.

Number of National Board Certified Teachers in the Southwestern Region

Arkansas	24
Louisiana	42
New Mexico	82
Oklahoma	274
Texas	36

Source: The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards Web site http://www.nbpts.org



Cimarron Middle School math teacher Susan Powell is the kind of teacher you would like to see in every classroom. She is experienced, enthusiastic, and speaks warmly of her students. She frequently reflects on her practice and encourages others to do likewise. She was a recent finalist for the Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, a competition funded by the National Science Foundation, and she is National Board Certified.

Powell says she owes her progress as a teacher and her National Board certification to her participation in the Oklahoma Master Teachers Project (MTP). "If I had not been involved in the Master Teachers Project, I would not have had a clue about how to go about getting the National Board Certification," admits Powell.

Powell became involved in the MTP because she was the only math teacher in a school of about 100 students, grades 5–8. "I needed help," she explains. "Although I had always individualized instruction, there were students that I felt I wasn't reaching. I was in a rural school and felt isolated. I am so much more connected to the world now."

Started in 1994 as a "training of trainers" with a select group of 15 math and science teachers, the Master Teachers Project was initially a cooperative effort between the Oklahoma State Department of Education and SEDL's Eisenhower Southwest Consortium for the Improvement of Mathematics and Science Teaching (SCIMAST). This year participation has grown to 38 teachers.

Sacra Nicholas, math coordinator for the project, says the program is one way the state department provides professional development for math and science teachers in Oklahoma with an emphasis on regional and local needs. Also it develops teacher leaders. Participants meet several times a year to reflect on their practice and learn new strategies for teaching and assessing math and science. In turn, they share what they have learned with colleagues in study groups and workshops.

Nicholas emphasizes that every study group is unique. "They focus on regional needs — they talk about topics important in their region of the state."

Powell is energized by the study group she began. What she loves most is the participation of teachers from all grade levels. "I'm always looking for something else for our kids," Powell explains. "The math book is never enough." Teachers bring lesson plans to the study group meetings where they share their classroom successes and failures and conduct demonstrations. Email and the Internet make it easy for the group to share projects and Web sites with each other between meetings. Each summer, Powell and another MTP participant who is a science teacher conduct workshops for math and science teachers in northern Oklahoma.

An additional benefit of the local teachers coming together is the vertical alignment that often follows. As a middle school teacher, Powell observes it has been helpful to be able to talk to a high school math teacher about what the students will be learning in high school and what they need to know well before high school.

SEDL program associate Maria Torres, who worked with the MTP for nearly seven years, says the highlight of her tenure with the project was that each participant developed classroom-based alternative assessments linked to Oklahoma's state standards in math and science. These assessments were field-tested and have been used by the master teachers to coach colleagues on assessment and on connecting assessment and instruction.

Powell acknowledges that since her participation in MTP began, she has more thoroughly integrated assessment into her classes. "My students know they are going to have to reflect on what they have done in class, to write and talk about what they learned." Although Powell says her students have always done well when tested, she thinks increased assessment combined with the many inquiry-based activities that she has adopted, help students remember concepts and formulas much better than before. One such activity consists of constructing a cylinder and determining its area. Another, a student favorite each spring, is fantasy baseball. Using player statistics, students create a circle wheel for each player. They must be able to use ratios and proportions, decimals, and the degrees in a circle to complete the project.

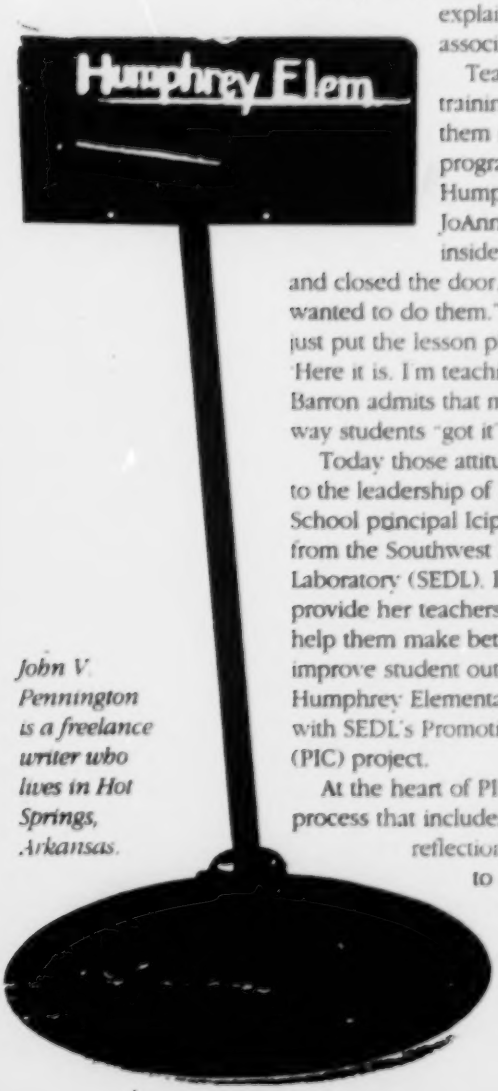
Powell's work with the project gave her confidence to apply for the National Board Certification, a process that includes preparation of a portfolio featuring videotaped classroom sessions as well as teaching artifacts and student products. There is also a rigorous written exam. Powell sees the board certification as an extension of her professional development that completes what the MTP started. "I'm a better teacher because of having gone through the process," she says. SEDL

Changing Practice to Meet Student Needs in Humphrey

• Little Rock
• Humphrey

By John V. Pennington

Three years ago in Humphrey, Arkansas (population 743), teachers were frustrated. For years they had been given new programs designed to improve student achievement but the district's test scores remained stagnant. At the same time, there was an increased push for accountability. The teachers in this delta school had few resources and were uncertain how to incorporate all of the state's mandates into their classrooms and improve student learning. "The teachers felt like they had a lot of little pieces, but they didn't know how to fit them together," explains former SEDL program associate Glenda Copeland.



Teachers attended numerous training sessions designed to help them implement mandates and programs, but according to Humphrey third-grade teacher JoAnne Barron, "When you got inside your own little classroom and closed the door, you did things the way you wanted to do them." She adds, "At one time I just put the lesson plan out there and said, 'Here it is. I'm teaching this today, get it.'" Barron admits that most of the time the only way students "got it" was by memorization.

Today those attitudes have changed, thanks to the leadership of Humphrey Elementary School principal Iciphine Jones, with assistance from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL). Because of Jones's desire to provide her teachers with training that would help them make better instructional choices and improve student outcomes, she agreed to let Humphrey Elementary School* become involved with SEDL's Promoting Instructional Coherence (PIC) project.

At the heart of PIC is an improvement process that includes the teachers' using inquiry, reflection, activities, and dialogue to examine their teaching and the beliefs and assumptions that underlie their practice, and to identify dilemmas, tensions, and inconsistencies within their practice. The process also includes collecting and using data to analyze student learning and to make instructional decisions that improve learning. As teachers begin to reflect on their practice, they discover that curriculum, instruction, and assessment are linked. Changing any one aspect impacts the others. Teachers learn to rethink what they teach and the kinds of experiences students must have to meet established standards. In short, engaging in the PIC process helps teachers understand how curriculum, instruction, and assessment and various mandates and programs mesh to ensure coherent instruction, all the while maintaining a focus on student learning.

SEDL's focus on student learning dovetails with Jones's philosophy. According to the educator with 23 years of teaching experience, there is only one way to raise test scores: "You have to shift the focus of teaching from teacher-centered classrooms to learner-centered classrooms."

During study group meetings, Humphrey's faculty identified assessment as a major issue. They recognized a lack of consistency in evaluation of student work. For example, a student might receive all As from her teacher one year in math, while the next year she would receive Cs. The grading experiences confused students and parents, and teachers were often unsure whether their students' work was of an appropriate quality for their grade level and age or whether their students were actually learning. The teachers realized that in order to implement state reforms and improve student outcomes, they would have to construct and apply consistent criteria for assessing student work across a student's K–8 experience.

John V. Pennington is a freelance writer who lives in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

**At the time Humphrey became involved in the PIC project, the school was a K–8 school. In the fall of 1998, the district established a middle school. The teachers who became middle school teachers have continued to take part in the study group.*

Members of the Humphrey Elementary School staff pictured clockwise beginning front left: school principal Iciphine Jones, third-grade teacher JoAnn Barron, second-grade teacher Rita Person, and kindergarten teacher Denice Houghton.

As the teachers examined student work—first the work of students other than their own and then that of their students—they were able to identify what constitutes quality work. The group then clarified their expectations of quality and determined levels or stages of development toward that quality work. The teachers were eventually able to agree on a method to provide consistent grading from grade level to grade level, eliminating any surprise in grading policy from teacher-to-teacher. They were also better able to communicate clear expectations to students.

During the second phase of the project, which began in the fall of 1998, the group focused on how teachers could best use the Arkansas Curriculum Framework and results from the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT 9), to make instructional decisions to meet student needs.

Teacher attitudes changed during Humphrey's participation in PIC. Kindergarten teacher Denise Houghton credits the PIC process for changing how she views teaching. She says the process "doesn't allow you to be content with what you're doing."

Barron reports that when the project started, the teachers did not want to change. "But as we progressed," she says, "reading professional literature, looking at the research, and getting positive feedback, we saw that it would work. The project made me want to be a better teacher." Teachers regularly sit in on other classes, providing their colleagues with constructive criticism.

Second-grade teacher Rita Persons agrees. Initially, there were so many concepts and issues of which to make sense, she was overwhelmed. But Persons says the study group sessions have enabled teachers to find ways to ensure every student "walks out of Humphrey Elementary with a quality education."

Jones is proud of her teacher's progress. "Teachers are taking a closer look at the curriculum and test scores," she reports. "They are looking closely at what they've been doing within their classrooms, identifying what their students need." When the Arkansas Department of Education initiated Smart Start, its standards-based initiative, the teachers in tiny Humphrey were ready for the challenge. Jones told her staff, "You're already doing this. You don't have to worry."

"We are glad we already had the pieces in place," she says. SEDL

Parkin Elementary School Networks for Success

By John V. Pennington

Parkin Elementary School principal Becky Gibson.

Learn more about the Southeast Comprehensive Assistance Center and the Reading Success Network by visiting http://www.sedl.org/secac.

John V. Pennington is a freelance writer who lives in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and contributes frequently to SEDLetter.

Parkin, Arkansas (population 2,025) is 42 miles east of Memphis, Tennessee, located in the Mississippi River Delta, one of the country's poorest regions. As you drive into Parkin, the area's agricultural background is obvious as the roads are lined with tractors, combines, and grain silos, alongside small frame houses. Historically, the town's school district has been among the state's poorest academic performers.

But things are starting to improve.

In 1999, 88 percent of the district's fifth-grade students scored in the lowest quartile on the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing Assessment and Accountability Program (ACTAAP) norm-referenced test. In 2000, 65 percent of the district's fifth graders scored in the test's lowest quartile. Although the district has not yet reached its academic goals, it is making progress, according to Parkin Elementary School principal Becky Gibson.

"Parkin has been on the state's academic distress list since the list was started," she says, "but we are doing better, slowly but surely."

Gibson, a 10-year veteran of the Parkin School District, worked six years as a fifth-grade teacher and one year as the district's librarian. She has been the elementary school principal for the past three years. She notes that like many other small districts in economically depressed and declining areas, Parkin has had difficulty attracting experienced educators.

Gibson explains, "We have suffered a lot in the past 10 years. That's because of one reason — inexperience. Small schools have small talent pools to draw from. Experienced teachers are drawn to larger districts with more resources and higher salaries." This situation contributes to a teacher turnover rate that is higher than average.

During Gibson's tenure at Parkin Elementary, the school's enrollment has dropped by nearly one-third, from 309 students to 214 students. In part, the school's gradual decline in enrollment can be attributed to limited employment opportunities in Parkin. But the principal admits the district's shrinking numbers are also linked to parents pulling their children out of the district to attend better-performing schools located in nearby communities. "The label of distress often affects the public's perception of the school," says Gibson.

In May 1999, with the help of the Arkansas Department of Education and SEDL's Southeast Comprehensive Assistance Center (SECAC) based in Metairie, Lousiana, Parkin Elementary introduced a process that Gibson thinks has put the school on the road to improving teacher performance, raising student test scores, and getting the district off the academic distress list — the Reading Success Network (RSN).

Administered by SECAC, the Reading Success Network strives to improve reading achievement. The goal is to have every student "reading independently and well by the end of the third grade," says Jill Slack, RSN coordinator for SECAC.

The RSN program supports a teacher's efforts in the classroom through a combination of components that include peer coaching, the use of reading and assessment tools, and data collection and analysis to inform instruction and determine appropriate intervention strategies. The program is tailor-made to fit each school's specific needs. One of the biggest challenges Parkin Elementary School teachers face is that their students come to school with limited exposure to text and print concepts and other pre-literacy skills that help ensure a good foundation for learning to read.

Slack explains that these students aren't likely to receive enrichment activities that help other children come to school ready to learn how to read. "They don't have the opportunity to go outside their backyard or their immediate area," she says. "There are certain words brought up in class that they don't understand because they've never been exposed to them . . . going on a field trip is probably the biggest experience of their life."

Most important, Gibson reports, the RSN program has given Parkin teachers and administrators the ability to network with other educators. Once a year, teachers and administrators attend SECAC's annual RSN regional meeting, where they talk to peers who face similar challenges. SECAC staff members

and literacy and math specialists from the Crowley's Ridge Educational Cooperative make regular visits to the school not only to help enrich the students' learning but also to update the teachers on strategies and methods.

Parkin Elementary teachers now use student-made books, teach thematic units, develop literacy folders that travel with children from grade to grade, and structure learning based on each student's interests. Gibson notes all of these techniques are the result of participating in the Reading Success Network.

The school is also taking steps to reach out to its community. In years past, Gibson says teachers and administrators focused so much on "behavior control and classroom management" that they completely lost contact with the community. Realizing that parental involvement is vital for improved student achievement, the school initiated literacy and math nights. On these nights, parents can come into the school in small groups to help their children with their homework with the assistance of a teacher. Taking steps such as these are crucial in communities where parents are not participating in their children's education and may lack basic skills themselves. The school has also started a Lunch Buddies program, in which community members come to the school to eat lunch with students, and a volunteer tutoring program, for which the town's mayor is an active volunteer. Additionally, a character education program has been implemented across the entire district this year, targeting fifth and sixth graders at the elementary school.

"We learned about all of this from RSN," Gibson reports. "It's a wonderful resource."

Slack observes that before Parkin Elementary began participating in the RSN program, the teachers felt isolated and were yearning for information. Now that the lines of communication have been opened, Gibson expects great things for her district. "The networking was the most important thing," Gibson said. "With more access to learning opportunities, the students are better able to measure up to outside standards. The future of Parkin looks good, as long as dedicated people continue to improve the process of instruction." SEDL

Parkin first graders enjoy playing a game during a break.

Resources for Rural Schools

By Leslie Blair

General Information

The ***ERIC Clearinghouse for Rural Education and Small Schools*** may be found at http://www.ael.org/eric/rural.htm. Many summaries of publications and articles are online; print copies of complete publications and article may be ordered at a reasonable cost. Currently available for downloading free of charge are hands-on science and math projects for middle school students.

Pulling Together: R&D Resources for Rural Schools, a collection of research and development resources for educators who work in rural settings is available online at http://www.ncrel.org/rural/. The resources, which are a product of the National Network of Regional Educational Laboratories, include Web sites, publications, training programs, model programs, and services. Each list of resources is preceded by an overview that outlines the topic and tells why it is important to educators in rural areas.

The ***Pulling Together*** Web site also contains a research document that examines the condition of education in rural America. ***Pulling Together: The Rural Circumstance*** looks at issues like the changes currently taking place in rural America, the role of educational research & development, and the different aspects of implementing and managing change in rural schools.

Service Learning

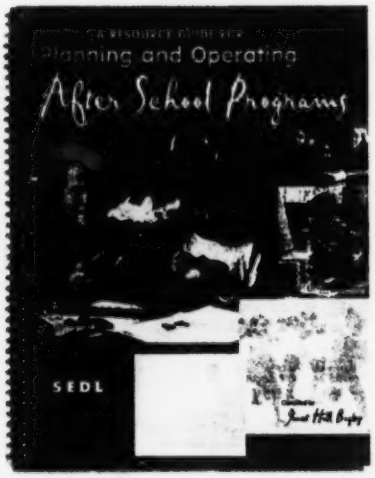
Learning In Deed: Making a Difference Through Service Learning, is an initiative of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation that aims to engage more youth in service to others as part of their academic experience. The Web site http://www.LearningInDeed.org offers examples of service learning projects, links for policymakers and researchers, and a special resource section for teachers.

Shumer's Self-Assessment for Service Learning is available online at http://www.umn.edu/~serve. This collection of instruments and worksheets can help schools, districts, or communities evaluate their service learning projects. Such evaluations are helpful when determining how to improve your program or when trying to secure funding. The assessment guide was tested for three years with service learning practitioners in eight states before being released in December 2000. Author Rob Shumer is the director of the Learn and Serve American National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, based at the University of Minnesota.

Find the ***Service Learning Quarterly*** online at http://www.closeup.org/servlern.htm. A recent issue of ***Service Learning Quarterly*** includes brief articles on curriculum infusion, meeting community needs, and suggestions for student reflection on their service learning projects.

Student Mental Health Issues

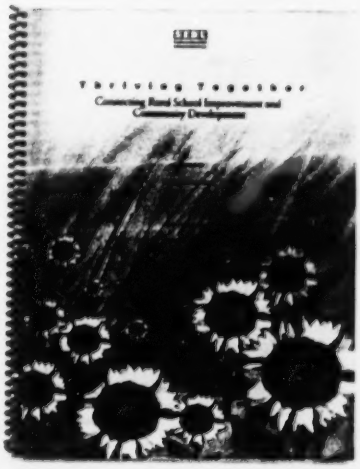
The Web site for UCLA's Center for Mental Health in Schools, http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/, covers a variety of student mental health issues and includes dozens of links and PDF files that may be downloaded. Some of the topics on this resource-laden site include "Dropout Prevention," "Teen Pregnancy Prevention and Support," "School Interventions to Prevent Youth Suicide," "Understanding and Minimizing Staff Burnout," and "Screen/Assessing Students: Indicators and Tools." The Center also offers a staff development curriculum on how to design regular classrooms and schools to ensure all students have appropriate opportunities to learn effectively.



After-School Programs

Compiled by Janet Hall Bagby and published by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, ***A Resource Guide for Planning and Operating After-School Programs*** provides descriptions and costs of resources available to help support after-school programs. Topics include management, communication, programming, community building and collaboration, and developing connections between K–12 education and after-school programs. The resource guide may be downloaded in a PDF file at http://www.sedl.org/pubs/fam18/afterschool.pdf.

Beyond the Bell: A Toolkit for Creating Effective After-School Programs is a practical guide to setting up an after-school program in schools large and small. It includes numerous worksheets that cover topics from setting goals to preparing an evaluation to creating an information form to be shared between the student's classroom teacher and after-school program tutor. Published by the North Central Regional Education Laboratory, ***Beyond the Bell*** is available online at http://www.ncrel.org/after/bellkit.htm.



School Improvement and Community Development

SEDL recently released ***Thriving Together: Connecting Rural School Improvement and Community Development***, a practical guide for schools or community organizations that want to undertake activities or programs beneficial to both the school and community. It provides tips for building effective teams, starting service-learning or entrepreneurial education projects, and transforming a school into a community center. This user-friendly guide also includes project planning worksheets and checklists, background information, fact sheets, and additional resources.

Thriving Together is available in print ($39.95) or on CD-ROM ($29.95). It is also available in print in Spanish, entitled ***Prosperando Juntos***. Ordering information may be found at http://www.sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/fam22.html.

(Benefits²) is a series of six issue papers published by SEDL during 1999 and 2000 for participants in its Rural Development Collaborative Action Team project. The papers cover a range of school improvement and community development topics but focus on service learning and entrepreneurial education as ways to link the community and increase student achievement. The issues may be found online at http://www.sedl.org/prep/benefits2/.

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Call for Presentations

for the

93rd Annual
National Rural Educational
Association (NREA)
Convention

to be held

October 24–27, 2001

in

Albuquerque, NM

You are cordially invited to submit a proposal to present a small group session at the 2001 NREA Annual Convention, "Rural Education: Celebrating Diversity." Convention participants will include rural school administrators, teachers, board members, regional service agency personnel, regional educational laboratory staff members, university and college faculty, state and federal agency personnel, researchers, and business and industry representatives.

The following are just a few of the suggested topic areas for presentation proposals:

- Addressing cultural discontinuity via the curriculum
- Dual language immersion programs
- Inclusive school initiatives
- Multicultural issues such as curriculum, diversity, ethnography, and special needs
- Place-based education in rural or small school districts
- Rural or small school reform
- Second language programs
- School & community multicultural blending
- Teaching methods for diverse populations
- Technology in rural schools
- Other topics of interest to rural educators

For more information on the convention or to request a presentation application form, please contact

NREA Headquarters
Office of Rural Education
Colorado State University
246 Education Building
Fort Collins, CO 80523-1588

Telephone
970-491-7022

Fax
970-491-1317

Email
jnewlin@lamar.colostate.edu

The deadline for submitting presentation proposals is June 15, 2001

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Printed in U.S.A.